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AUTHOR Bornscheuer, Joan H.
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ABSTRACT

An experimental approach to reading a foreign language is described, in which the assigned text was taped by the instructor. These tapes were then supplemented by worksheets which included content questions on the author and vocabulary and grammar exercises based on the text. The tapes were made available to the students in the language laboratory; thus, class attendance was made optional for the duration of the experiment. Class periods were used for playing segments of tapes for clarification and vocabulary enrichment, and for discussion and deeper analysis of the story. This unit was generally used once or twice in the semester as a change of pace. In the classroom situation, it was found that the experiment helped students to be more actively involved in the reading of literature. Their understanding and appreciation of the story were enhanced, and their vocabulary and listening comprehension improved. (Author/AMH)

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READING IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A MULTI SKILL APPROACH

Joan H. Bornscheuer

It seems to be an established fact of life that we language teachers introduce our second year students to the literature of our particular foreign language: short stories and excerpts from longer works constitute the core of many of the sophomore level courses in this country today. Indeed, in the student's acquisition of the four basic language skills, it is the natural next step to add reading and discussion of literary topics to the cultural ones often covered in first year. Yet how often, after the drive and enthusiasm generated at the beginning levels, does this introduction to literature fall a little flat? And how often are the comprehension and appreciation of fine passages minimized by what we might typify as a passive approach to them? Today, when our entire profession has been put on its mettle by the decline in foreign language enrolments and stiff competition for students from other disciplines, the whole question of reading comprehension - and more specifically, the reading comprehension of literary texts- would seem to be too important a matter to be neglected, something which it has been all too often.

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We are all familiar with the traditional approach to the reading of literature in second year language courses and it goes something along these lines: first an introduction to the author and work by the teacher, then the assignment of a passage for study - or should it be called deciphering?- a subsequent discussion in the classroom and finally a test over the material. The disadvantages of this method are numerous and well known to us all; poor preparation of the assignment - either a cursory glance or a frantic hunt through the dictionary for the new words, with the translation going between the lines of the text, thereby blurring not only the student's vision but also his or her understanding; participation in the classroom discussion of only the well prepared or vocal few; incomplete comprehension of the text and in so many cases zero real appreciation. It always seemed to me that after the intense activity of the beginning classes - drills, lab activities, games, dialogs etc., - that the students were not active enough in their second year classes and that many times as a result, their enthusiasm waned.

When I finally addressed myself to the problem, after becoming increasingly aware of it over a period of years, I decided that "involvement" would be the key to any system I devised. The students would not sit passively and read their

assignments or listen passively during classroom discussion but rather each of them, if possible, would be actively engaged in the whole process. Ideally, all four skills would be used so that the sophomore course would be a true continuation of the multi-skill format of the first year courses. By this active involvement from beginning to end of the reading, the students would not be so likely to consider literature as something strange or inaccessible to them. Rather, by following a specific series of steps, with definite performance objectives built in, second year students would continue to slowly develop their skills, adding to their oral and written skills the reading of good literature; they would gradually increase the pace of skill acquisition by building on what they already knew, so that instead of racing to an incomplete understanding of the story presented to them, they would proceed systematically, in an orderly fashion, to its more complete comprehension.

I should state at this juncture that this system is not intended to replace the instruction of an entire semester but rather to be used on one or two occasions only. It has been based on one, or at the most two reading selections per semester and simply inserted at the point in the schedule where these readings would normally fall. Thus, so far at

least, this method has provided a break of "change of pace" in the normal activities. It has the advantage of not only providing this variety but also developing useful materials for the language department which can then be used as additional activities in other courses or as part of the testing and placement of new students. Prior to embarking on a description of the system, I should say that it is still evolving; each time I use it, I try new variations and additions to the basic theme; this paper is in fact an "état présent" or update of the article in Foreign Language Annals in September 1976.

Generally, I have tried this approach with a reading scheduled towards the end of the semester, making sure that I can assign from one to two weeks' classes to the activity, depending on the length of the passage: Albert Camus' "L'Hôte" for example occupied two calendar weeks, whereas an extract from St. Exupéry's "Terre des Hommes" toom only one week, in each case excluding the test at its conclusion.

Prior to the time scheduled for the chosen reading, I make tapes of the story, of 16 to 20 minutes duration each, dividing it up as seems appropriate, along the following lines:-

Tape I — Introduction to the author and the specific work, with questions on both. These may be provided by the textbook; if not, mimeographed sheets must be provided and I will discuss these later.

Tape 2 — The first part of the reading with the content questions from the textbook over the passage read.

Tape 3 (or as many more tapes as needed) — The balance of the reading and the questions.

I include an answer to each content question on the appropriate tape; this is obviously an optional feature but I find that it provides an added motivation for the students to go to the language lab.

In the case of Camus' "L'Hôte" for instance, I made 6 tapes in all since the reading was divided in the textbook into two parts, each designed for the instruction of a week's classes and each requiring three tapes. At the risk of sounding simplistic, upon completion of the taping or sometime prior to the scheduled time for this activity, it is essential to check the quality of each tape to be used by the students; so much emphasis is placed on the student's being able to deal successfully with the tapes in the language lab that good clear quality is of paramount importance.

Once the tapes are made and copies produced if necessary, the next step is to prepare the handouts for the students. The following items need to be included:-

(1) Specific "How to" instructions for completing the assignment.

(2) Questions on the author and/or the introduction to the reading where appropriate. As I mentioned earlier, in many cases these need to be made up by the instructor. Personally, I make them up along the lines of questions asked in class over previous reading passages, using wherever possible, vocabulary and expressions which will help the students further develop their critical skills.

(3) Vocabulary lists: these are to encourage the students not to write the translation of the new words on the actual text between the lines. I have used the device of marking with an asperisk certain words and expressions which are to be tested as part of the students' active basic vocabulary.

(4) Worksheets: these may include items of grammar or vocabulary; again this depends on the individual instructor's focus. I include for example well-known synonyms of new words, spaces for the student to indicate the correct gender of words and also transformations of the literary past tense in French into the more used and useful passé composé, since these are elements which I stress all semester long.

Once I have prepared the tapes and handouts, and readied the personnel in the language laboratory, it is time to explain the assignment to the class. It is necessary to make this as clear and precise as possible, stressing that the aim of the experiment is to make the story or excerpt more meaningful to them. The easiest way for this to occur is for them to follow the "step by step" instructions on the handout: these include the following steps:-

(1) Reading the passage silently, in an attempt to grasp some of its meaning.

(2) Listening to the tapes in sequence, completing and mastering each one, before proceeding to the next.

(3) Answering the questions on the tapes, first orally and then writing the answer: it is not necessary to use the exact answer provided on the tape.

(4) Studying the active vocabulary and completing the worksheets and finally

(5) Discussing the text in class or during office hours.

Class attendance is made optional since tapes are available in the language lab and sign up sheets are provided to the lab personnel to record attendance. Problems encountered in listening to the tapes can be discussed with me as outlined in step 5 above; I try to extend my office hours somewhat during these experiments so as to be available to those students who elect to complete their entire assignment outside the classroom.

The class periods during this time can be used for various purposes:-

(1) for the playing of tapes or segments of tapes for clarification, pronunciation, vocabulary enrichment etc.

(2) for explaining matters pertaining to grammar or vocabulary usage.

(3) for discussing the text with the class as a whole or with individuals. Discussion in small groups is especially effective here.

I have found this to be a good opportunity to introduce questions of interpretation, as opposed to those of content, the latter usually being dealt with adequately in the textbook. During this time, students come to class, having already read and heard the text at least once and having prepared the answers to the content questions; therefore, a greater proportion of them knows what is happening in the reading. Thus it is relatively easy to proceed to questions such as "How is the author expressing himself here? How does the author present the characters?" and so on. This is then the ideal time to start ot teach (or to continue teaching, as the case may be) literary criticism in its first stages. This process will help language majors and others interested in literature prepare themselves for the more advanced courses in the survey of literature.

Using this method towards the end of the semester has the advantage of providing a "change of pace" activity when the students are somewhat fatigued and pressured by term papers and the like in their other classes. Availability of the tapes in the language laboratory makes it convenient for students to work at their own pace and time, also to go over material heard or discussed in class in preparation for the test. Many students discover that, by what Charles Kreidler calls a "systemative reinforcement and extension" of reading comprehension, they are able, not only to read, understand and enjoy a text but even interprete what they are reading.

The final stage of this multi-skill approach to reading is the testing segment which naturally follows all of the above. When I used this method originally, I prepared a single test over the material. However it occurred to me that given the multi-skill format to the first stages of the method, it would be more sensible and indeed logical to provide several kinds of test of which the students would take one. Students performing poorly on the test of their first choice could then be given one- or indeed more if necessary - of the other versions of the tests as a re-test to achieve the ideal 80% mastery level.

Recently then I have prepared the three following kinds of tests:

1) Oral 2) Written 3) Comprehension

The first two, oral and written, are based largely on the content questions provided with the reading passage and answered on the tape, plus some analytical questions based on the classroom discussions where appropriate. The third type of test, comprehension, is of the multiple choice variety, with the questions or statement and the usual four alternative answers in the target language. Since all four skills are used in this reading method, it is reasonable to have them all represented in the testing process.

It is obvious from what I have been saying that a fair amount of preparation time is needed for this method - but then that is true of any new approach we try. Based on my own experience, I should say that the returns on the investment of time are excellent. Student comments on the Teacher/Course Evaluation Questionnaire administered at the end of each semester at the University of Texas at El Paso have tended to confirm my own impressions: everyone is active in this approach and enjoys this activity: there are definite steps to take which when accomplished, help the students to a greater comprehension of the text in hand; and these indeed are no small accomplishments.

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